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ABSTRACT

A study collected information from 52 of the 53 state Future Farmers of America (FFA) executive secretaries who were sent questionnaires on middle school student enrollment in agricultural education and membership in the national FFA organization. Results showed that 30 states have agricultural education programs in the middle school level, with a total of 52,968 students enrolled. Additionally, 19 states reported having FFA membership at that level, with an estimated 17,722 middle school students being members of FFA. Middle school agricultural education programs last from 6 to 36 weeks in length, with the average being 17 weeks. Some of the conclusions reached by the study were the following: (1) middle school agricultural education programs are not a new development; (2) most of the states include competitive events for middle school FFA members; (3) middle school agricultural education programs include a core curriculum of plant science, career exploration, agricultural literacy, animal science, conservation, and mathematics; (4) student benefits included increased agricultural knowledge, increased participation in FFA activities, career awareness, leadership development, reduced dropout rates, and increased self-esteem; and (5) the major disadvantages of middle school student participation were increased burnout, duplication of course work from the high school, increased competition with other courses, and a reduction of time available for other career exploration. Seven recommendations for improving middle school agricultural education were offered. (KC)

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AN EXAMINATION OF MIDDLE SCHOOL AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND FFA PROGRAMS: SURVEY RESULTS FROM STATE FFA EXECUTIVE SECRETARIES

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INTRODUCTION

Nationally, enrollment in agricultural education programs and membership in the National FFA Organization has declined. In 1990, there were 518,959 students enrolled in secondary agricultural education programs, with only 74.6% (387,143) of the students enrolled as members of the FFA. This compares to an enrollment of 697,499 in agricultural education and a membership in the FFA of 509,734 in 1977. In an effort to increase membership, a national constitutional amendment was passed at the FFA national convention in 1988 that allowed students in the middle schools to become members.

In 1985 over 33 percent of all secondary agriculture instructors taught one or more junior high or middle school courses in agriculture (Phipps & Osborne, 1988). It has been anticipated that if middle schools offered exploratory agricultural education in the middle school grades, those students would remain in secondary programs. Luft (1990) pointed out that agricultural education programs at the junior high level may spark an interest in some students that had not previously given any thought to studying or pursuing a career in agriculture.

In addition to the recruitment and membership benefits, agricultural education at the middle school can help to broaden the number of individuals in our society that may be more agriculturally literate (Luft, 1990). Moreover, Herren and Denham (1990) said that the agricultural awareness of the community will also be expanded.

There is little information written about agricultural education programs at the middle schools. Neither state departments of education or the National FFA Organization systematically collect information regarding these programs. Information such as: enrollments, characteristics of middle school programs, funding of programs, benefits, disadvantages, barriers, and facilitators was needed.

Information from two sources was used to develop a framework for examining reasons students enroll in these programs. First, Jackson and Bosma (1990) indicated that middle schools include some three to five

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years between the elementary and high school focused on the educational needs of students in the in-between years. Second, Lam (1982) had classified the barriers to enrollment into three main categories: (1) intrapersonal reasons such as attitudes, perceptions, images, motivation, career maturity and value systems; (2) the influence of others such as parents, friends, counselors, neighbors, teachers and other relatives; (3) remote external reasons such as socioeconomic status, parental income and parental educational levels. Therefore, information was collected regarding the educational needs of students, intrapersonal reasons, and the influence of others guided this investigation. Since this study did not include the students themselves, the remote external reasons for enrolling in programs was not included.

PURPOSE

This study was designed to collect information from state FFA executive secretaries on middle school enrollment in agricultural education and membership in the National FFA Organization. More specifically the objectives were as follows:

1. To establish national baseline information regarding middle and junior high school enrollment in agricultural education and membership in the National FFA Organization.

2. To identify perceived features and critical components of middle and junior high school agricultural education programs.

3. To identify perceived factors influencing students' decisions to enroll in middle and junior high school agricultural education programs and become members in the National FFA Organization.

4. To identify the perceived benefits and disadvantages of agricultural education programs.

METHODS

This project was developed as a descriptive survey research design. The state FFA executive secretary questionnaire was designed by the researchers, with the assistance of the National FFA Organization, selected state FFA executive secretaries and selected teacher educators. Content validity was established by a panel of teacher educators and the Ohio FFA executive secretary. The questionnaires were mailed in the Winter of 1991 to 53 state executive FFA secretaries from the USA, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands and Washington, DC.

Many of the questions on the survey sought to determine baseline data on the enrollment of students in middle or junior high school agricultural education programs. The questionnaire included questions to determine the executive secretaries' perceptions of major encouragers and barriers to enrollment. In addition, they commented on the major benefits and disadvantages of the states' middle or junior high school

agricultural education programs. The survey also asked their opinions of whether or not middle or junior high school membership in the FFA helped to increase membership in the high school FFA.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Fifty-two questionnaires were returned by the state FFA executive secretaries and summarized for the results of this study. The information presented in Table 1 indicated there were 30 states that reported having agricultural education programs in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades enrolling a total of 52,968 students. Additionally, 19 states reported having FFA membership at that level. An estimated 17,722 middle school students were members of the FFA, or 33% of the population that enrolled in agricultural education.

Table 1

Enrollment in Programs					
Grade Level	Schools w/ Ag. Ed.	Students w/ Ag. Ed.	Ave. Program Length	Schools w/ FFA	Students w/ FFA
6th	21	924	9 wks.	15	124
7th	514	22,056	20 wks.	378	4,730
8th	1,012	29,988	21 wks.	853	12,868
Total	1,547	52,968	17 wks.	1,246	17,722

The earliest middle school agricultural education program was reported being conducted for 8th graders in 1926 in Virginia. Vermont reported starting 7th grade programs in 1930. Mississippi reported the first 6th grade program in 1974.

Membership in the FFA was first accepted in Virginia for 8th graders in 1926. Louisiana first accepted membership for 7th graders in 1960. Mississippi reported accepting sixth graders in 1974.

Seventeen states reported that they provided some type of state level competition for middle or junior high school FFA members. Fourteen states held state level competition in conjunction with secondary school FFA events. Six state FFA executive secretaries said that competition was separate from high school FFA events. The more popular state competitions held included: creed speaking, livestock judging, public speaking, crops, and showing livestock. Fourteen states did not recommend national competition for middle school students. Seven states executive secretaries encouraged national competitions. Of the seven, four executive secretaries, recommended activities such as quiz bowls, essay contests, creed speaking, and tool and material identification.

Five states indicated that the middle school FFA chapter was organized separately from that of the high school. Whereas, 14 states said the chapter was a joint chapter with the high school FFA.

Twenty-seven states reported that dues were charged to the middle school FFA members. The range of dues was $.50 to $8.00, with an average of $3.98. Thirty-one states reported funding programs locally, 14 states used state funds and seven indicated using federal funds.

The middle school agricultural education programs last from 6 to 36 weeks in length, with the average being 17 weeks. Fourteen states reported core curricula (see Table 2) including 23 different items. Only six of these topics were reported in common by at least one-half of the state FFA executive secretaries and included: plant science, career exploration, agricultural literacy, animal science, conservation and mathematics.

Table 2

State Competitions

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Creed	5
Livestock Judging	3
Public Speaking	3
Crops	3
All Contests	3
Livestock Showing	2
Meats	2
Horse Judging	2
Agricultural Mechanics	2
Agricultural Science Fair	2
Dairy Foods	2
Speech	1
Proficiency Awards	1
Parliamentary Procedures	1
Farm Management	1
Agricultural Sales	1
Job Interview	1
Quiz Bowl Contest	1
Essay Contest	1
Poultry	1
Ornamental Horticulture	1
Agriscience Student Recognition	1
Computers in Agriculture	1
Tractor Driving	1
Electrification Essay	1
Seed	1
Tree Identification	1

The major perceived factor encouraging middle school students to enroll was their agricultural education instructor. Other factors included: FFA activities, the program itself, school administrators, counselors, parents and siblings.

Information was also collected on the perceived major barriers to having students enroll in middle or junior high school agricultural education programs. The major barriers included: funding, scheduling, negative perceptions of agriculture and a shortage of certified agricultural education teachers.

Increased agricultural literacy was perceived as the major student benefit of middle school agricultural education programs. Many also thought that enrollment would increase at the secondary school level. Other benefits included: participation in FFA activities, career awareness, leadership development, reduced drop-out rates and increased self-esteem.

Few disadvantages were identified. Those identified included: a possibility of increased student burn-out, duplication of course work from the secondary school, resistance of school administrators, increased competition with other courses and a reduction in the time available for other career exploration courses.

Increased enrollment was perceived as a popular state benefit for middle or junior high school agricultural education programs. Other perceived benefits included: more students and teachers involved with the agricultural education program, students who are better equipped to go into the high school agricultural program, increased retention of students, increased students' accomplishment at earlier levels, increased participation in state contests, increased awareness of agriculture, and additional leadership opportunities.

Most state FFA executive secretaries perceived there were no disadvantages to states who enroll middle or junior high school students in agricultural education programs. However, some disadvantages were cited. They included: student burn out, increased number of students for teachers, and a large expenditure of money for a non-vocational program.

State FFA executive secretaries were specifically asked to indicate their opinion whether or not middle or junior high school membership in the FFA helped to increase membership in the high school FFA. Twenty-five executive secretaries said yes, while three said no, and 24 did not respond. In addition, executive secretaries were asked to write an explanation of their opinion. Some felt that middle or junior high school membership in the FFA helps retention in the long run. One commented that programs encourage students who might not have otherwise become members.

Based on the findings presented above, the researchers have reached several conclusions about middle and junior high school agricultural education and FFA programs. These conclusions are:

1. Middle and junior high school agricultural education and FFA programs are not a new development. More than one-half of the states operated some type of middle and junior high

school agricultural education program. Generally, these programs were about one semester in length. Furthermore, nearly one-third of the states included middle and junior high school students as members of the FFA.

2. Most of the states include some type of competitive events held in conjunction with secondary school FFA contests. However, there was little support for national competition for these students.

3. Most states financed their middle school chapters by charging dues and operated them jointly with the high school FFA.

4. Most middle school agricultural education programs included a core curriculum composed of plant science, career exploration, agricultural literacy, animal science, conservation and mathematics.

5. The local agricultural education instructor was the major encourager of student enrollment. Other encouragers included: FFA activities, the program itself, school administrators, counselors, parents and siblings.

6. The major barriers to students enrolling in middle grade level agricultural education programs included: funding, scheduling, negative perceptions of agriculture, and a shortage of certified agricultural education teachers.

7. The student benefits of middle and junior high school agricultural education programs included: increased agricultural literacy, increased enrollment, increased participation in FFA activities, career awareness, leadership development, reduced dropout rates, and increased self-esteem.

8. The state benefits of middle and junior high school agricultural education programs included: increased enrollments, a better educated population, more students and teachers involved with the agricultural education program, increased participation in state FFA contests, and students who are better equipped to enter high school agricultural education programs.

9. The major student disadvantages of middle and junior high school agricultural education and FFA programs were: increased burnout, duplication of course work from the high school, increased competition with other courses, and a reduction in the time available for other career exploration courses.

10. Most state FFA executive secretaries perceived no state disadvantages to middle and junior high school agricultural education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were offered for establishing these programs:

1. Since the FFA is an intracurricular activity, The National FFA Organization, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture should encourage development of a middle and/or junior high school agricultural education core curricula that addresses its mission, content, goals and objectives, learning strategies, and funding options prior to expanding FFA programs to that level.

2. The National FFA Organization should not develop national competitive events for middle and junior high school students at this time.

3. State education agencies and teacher education programs should design programs that would prepare current and prospective teachers to work with middle and junior high school students.

4. State education agencies should establish criteria for teacher certificates and funding options for agricultural education programs at the middle and junior high school level.

5. Agricultural educators and middle school educators should design separate competitive events for middle and junior high school students.

6. Agricultural education teachers should develop promotional materials that include the benefits of participating in middle and junior high school agriculture and FFA programs.

7. Agricultural education teachers should work with boards of education, administrators, and guidance counselors in establishing policies (e.g., funding, scheduling, staffing) that are conducive to middle and junior high school agricultural education and FFA programs.

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